

Hellfire Holiday

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Hellfire Holiday

> <meta name="Generator"> Red Christmas **

Hellfire Holiday

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There was disturbingly little to do over the non-existent 'Christmas break'. Train. Get to know Callisto. Train some more. Get to hate Callisto. Train again. Hate Sean for bringing Callisto back from New York with him. And then, well, train a little more.

But as Jubilee watched the one-on-one combat sessions down in the Biosphereâ€”the black-haired, one-eyed older woman proceeding to toss Gayle Edgerton about with little effortâ€”she just had to snicker. Granted, Gayle was hardly inexperienced in combatâ€”she had at one time run with Jono, and that led to getting drunk with Jono. Inevitably, Gayle would watch him open his big yap and get the rest of his mates in trouble, forcing her to get Jono's pissed arse out of trouble. Hence, she was fairly competent with your normal, day-to-day brawling.

However, Callisto was not a 'day-to-day brawler'. She moved with a fluid grace and animal ferocity that reminded Jubilee, in an odd way, of Logan. From the wild dark hair to her sinewy musclesâ€”Maybe that was why Jubilee didn't like her. Because she so resembled in so many ways her own mentorâ€”who was almost a father as well as a protector and partner.

Her blue eyes were so intent on the scene that she didn't notice the soft steps behind her. A voice, delicately spoken with a hint of a French accent yet full of disdain, asked, "What fascination do you have with those two? Callisto is nothing but a grubby Morlock, and

Gayle is an Emplate. Yet you watch them with some strange, morbid interest. Why?"

Jubilee sighed softly, looking her shoulder as the Monet. "Ya never know what ya can learn when ya sit and watch, M. Might try it, ya know."

"Jubilee, the day you can actually presume to lecture me on study habits will be a grim day indeed," Monet murmured as she took a seat not far from the younger GenXer. "Or a precursor to Armageddon. Your pick."

"Ha, ha, ha," Jubilee drawled, "Yer such a cut-up, Monet. Let me tell you. A laugh a minute. About as entertaining as seeing Jono trying to manage two girls these days."

Monet arched one delicate brow as she tilted her head to regard Jubilee, vaguely amused. "Oh, you've noticed their recent romantic difficulties?"

"Dude, I think Doc Doom knows that Jono's screwin' up again. I think the whole extended X-family knows. I think they know it other dimensions. How can you miss it? He needs to be awarded the "Idiot Man Award" for '99."

Monet's lips quirked into a smile, and she allowed herself a discreet chuckle as she watched the goings on down in the grotto.

Jubilee's gaze returned there as wellâ€"expression tightening as she winced. Gayle hadâ€| hit a tree. Forcefully. "That had to hurt."

Monet said nothing. She merely set her gaze on the glass of the observation booth and looked out over the greenery and the figures training in the distance.

* * * * *

"_Shiiiiiiiiiiiiite!"_

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Gayle decided that this must be God's idea of a joke. He'd given her a chanceâ€"no, given her hope for a cure for her condition. Instead, He'd given her a unforgiving Morlock instructor and a life of leeching away the energy she needed to survive form the man she loves. It was karmically appropriate, she thoughtâ€"as her body impacted against one of the trees with enough force to break bones.

"You're sloppy."

"Thank youâ€"emrph!â€"very much for that in-depth evaluation. I'll work on all of your suggestions and critiques," Gayle began to haul herself up from the soft earthâ€"and then found herself presented with a hand to help her up.

"You have potential, but you're sloppy," came the terse reiteration, "You're under-confident in your abilities, and to overcompensate you present to the world a more cocksure image."

However, I think you're buying too much into your own image and forgetting you're just a teenager who's been through a brawl or two," Callisto hefted Gayle to her to her feet easily, and then coughed roughly once.

Gayle watched her warily for a moment. The Morlock's illness came and went it seemedâ€"no one on the team could pinpoint when a coughing fit would strike. But apparently it would pass, so there would be no reason to rush her to the medlab. "Anything else you'd like to point out?" the girl asked dryly.

Gayle was answered by hands trailing feather-light over her sides. "I want to see if you broke anything." The Morlocks enhanced sense of touch could tell the story just as well as any medical scanner could, and without having to go anywhere. "You seem alright. Now, out of the biosphere."

Gayle sighed softly, but nevertheless nodded her assent, "Yes ma'am." Callisto was a stern taskmaster, but Gayle understood her drive. She'd heard the stories about the Morlocks, the Massacre, and moreâ€"it was part of their 'Mutant History' classes.

"I'm not a ma'am, girl," the old woman said bluntly, heading back up to where Jubilee and Monet had watched their little exercise.

"I'm not a girl, ma'am," retorted Gayle, trailing just behind her teacher.

"You're a damned pup to me."

Gayle chuckled at that particular image, and then sighed as the doors slid open. She saw the pair of uniformed girls sitting at the control panel, and nodded briefly.

Jubilee gave her a weak grin, before cutting her eyes to Monet, who did not respond to their presence at all. "Cal did a real number to you down there, eh? You okay?"

"You could say that," Gayle replied, and then rubbed at her side. "I thought for sure I was going to have cracked some ribsâ€" " she paused as she looked at Monet and saw the girls trance-state for the first time. "What the hell is up with her?"

Jubilee glanced back at Monet again before rising. "She's autistic. Orâ€| something like that. Goes into trances. When she's good and ready, she'll come back around," she said, "Care if I split with ya? She can be like this for hours."

Gayle watched the pair, before looking over at Callisto, who only shrugged. Gayle and Callisto's knowledge of the student body were almost equal, and that wasn't a very comforting thought, nevermind Jubilee's cavalier attitude about Monet's strange spells. "Uh, sure, Jubilee," said Gayle as she headed toward the door. She shook her head slowly. This was certainly not anything she'd expected it to beâ€|

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'ave I mentioned that I hate this? Jonothon asked for what was probably the tenth time that evening. He was standing beside the

ladder on which one Everett Thomas perched, in the common room of the main building. It was a large, open area and in the center was a Christmas tree. A fourteen-foot Christmas tree. And while Jonothon held the ladder steady, Everett Thomas put decorations on the tree.

And Everett was not a pleased young man. Now he understood why Paige and Angelo had taken the opportunity to head to the Guthrie farm, using Joelle's baby's pending due date as an excuse. He himself would like to be a few hundred miles away from the complaining Brit.

"Yes," Everett stated, irritation coloring his normally accommodating tone, "you have. Enough times that I could give you a list of the times that you've said it, and what prompted it."

Jonothon arched a brow lazily as he looked idly up upon the other young man. Jonothon was now twenty-two to Everett's eighteen, and the irony of hearing the younger boy stooping to his own level of biting sarcasm was amusing to someone who'd been doing it for a much, much longer time. While Everett was normally quite eloquent when he wished to be, his calmness and ease had apparently fled.

Jonothon 1, Everett 0.

The Brit was rather smug as he said, One would think that the joyous 'oliday season feelin's' were leavin' yer, Everett. Yer seem a touchâ€¦ tense.

Everett took a breath, and sighed. "I'm not tense," he replied, "I've justâ€¦ I'm justâ€¦ It's justâ€¦" the boy growled, "I'm tired of hearing you whine! You've done it for the past three hours! Can't you just do your job, try and take a little enjoyment out of the holidays, and stop bitching?"

Jonothon realized he'd never, in this, the three years and one month that he'd been at this school, heard Everett curse.

Jonothon 2, Everett 0.

Why, Ev, I didn't know yer felt 'at way, said the Brit.

"You're baiting me, aren't you?"

Why Ev, 'ow could yer think such a thing? I'm trying to be jolly a4nd enjoy a chat with a mate. Bait yer, indeed. The very thought. Tsk.

Ev just made a low growl of frustration. "You know," the young man said, trying to keep his voice even, "I think you enjoy this. I think you get some kick trying to make everyone else as miserable as you areâ€¦" or make yourself be. I mean, you'd think that you'd learn."

Jonothon's eyes narrowed dangerously. Learn wot? he asked, a growling edge to his tone.

Jonothon 2, Everett 1.

"A lot. And before you get angry and try and knock me off the ladder,

just hear me out?" Everett asked carefully as he slowly began to come down the ladder.

And even though Everett had asked nicely for him not to, Jonothon still pondered dumping him into the evergreen.

Nah. He'd just torment Jubilee sometime later in Everett's presence. That'd be a much better idea.

After getting his feet firmly on the floor, with no fear of becoming an ornament in the tree itself, the younger man looked up at Jono as he went to carefully move the ladder. The Brit obligingly helped, but only because it'd get the job done faster. Everett talked all the while, though, and that only proceeded to grate on Jonothon's few remaining nerves, "Now, I knowâ€¦ things are not easy for youâ€¦"

Oh, thank yer fer yer bountiful understanding. Warms my non-existant 'eart, let me tell yer.

Everett gave another growl of frustration. "I asked you to listen. _Please_?"

Jonothon 3, Everett 1.

Gowon, guv. I'm listenin'.

"Thank you," Everett trudged up the ladder to the mid-point on the tree, delivering ornaments in aesthetically-pleasing locations. "Now. I know things haven't been easy since your and Paige'sâ€¦ non-relationshipâ€¦ blew up."

Jonothon _glared_ fiercely up at him. Love yer terminology, _mate_.

But even Everett had to wince at his own choice of words. "Sorry," he apologized quickly, "butâ€¦ it was the only thing I could think of. Anyway, it's justâ€¦ I know not everything has gone like you would have liked it to, but, y' know, you've had a lot of good that's walked into your life lately."

Oh. Do tell.

"Well, Gayle."

Jonothon groaned inwardly. Dumping Everett into that Christmas tree sounded better and better every time he thought about it. Especially with those memories, gnawing at the back of his head, knowing that less than a month ago, he'd almost driven her into the arms of his best friend. It'd put another strain between him and Angelo and had driven another wedge in the gap between Gayle and himself.

However, from his vantage and with his work before him, Everett didn't notice the tension that began in the young man below. He just continued to rattle on. "I know that things between you and Paige didn't work, Jono, but you and Gayle have a history, and she obviously cares about you-"

Yeh. So much that she almost shagged me best mate out in the grotto.

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"I'm sorryâ€|did you say something?"

Not at all. Keep talkin'. Me attention's all yers. Jonothon could
hear the tree calling. Calling to be fed one annoying, if
well-meaning boy from St. Louisâ€|

"Yeah," Everett continued as glass baubles and decorations began to
find their on the way to the branches of the tree, "It's just you let
yourself get soâ€| caught up in everything negative. I would hope by
now you'd discover something around here that didn't mean more pain
and misery for you."

To his credit, Everett actually sounded concerned. However, Jonothon
was at the height of his cynicism. The holidays did that to him,
really. The commercialism, the false cheer and charity, and all of
the loved ones getting cozy under mistletoe while he had neither a
person to hold and no mouth to kiss them with. Everett, Jonothon
began, weariness touching his tone, I realize yer tryin' t' be a
swell mate an' all, butâ€| t' be 'onest?

"Yes?"

Shut yer Goddamned mouth and finish the tree. That way, I don't have
deal with yer condescending 'please be 'appy' whining, an' yer don't
'ave t' 'ear me bitch and moan.

Everett gave a soft sigh. "There are days, Jonothon, you honestly _do
_have my pity. But not for any of the more obvious reasons."

Jonothon 3, Everett 2.

Bugger off, Ev.

The tree was finished in silence.

* * * * *

The whiteness was cold against her dark skin, but she hardly
noticed.

She burrowed down, and held there. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

They marched past. Quiet. She detected the scent gunpowder and steel.
But she stayed. Hidden. Hiding.

They pushed through the snowâ€"there'd been a heavy fall that
morning. It piled to the waist on a normal man, easily. So it hid her
small, dark form, just as easily.

"Wait."

There was a voice. It was distant. Cold. Feminine. The cold-time and
the hurt-thoughts always made it harder to hear. She was losing the
sounds again, feeling her skin stiffen and toughen.

There was badness here.

The voice sounded again, but she was losing the words just being close to her. She needed to bolt! To Run! Flee! Flee! Or she'd be caught and it'd be the bad-place again.

The hard earth was no match for her claws. She heard shouts, angry cries, and then nothing as she found one of the natural hollows deep within and hid. They would not find her here. They would not follow. She was safe.

Safe.

* * * * *

After leaving the biosphere, Callisto had parted from the pair, leaving Jubilee and Gayle to walk back to the main building.

Neither Jono nor Everett were presentâ€”presumably, they had to go decorate the smaller tree in the lounge, as well as put away the ladder they had used to reach the top.

Gayle paused and gave a slight smile at the tree in the common area of the main building. "The boys did a nice job, eh?" she asked as she walked past.

"You mean, Ev did a good job, while Jono sat and carried on like a three-year-old," Jubilee retorted as she headed not to the lounge, where she knew the boys would be, but the small kitchen. In the days when the Hellions were housed here, it had been solely the faculty's, but now served them all.

Even though it made her wince, Gayle had to admit she had a point. "Spot on. He probably just stood there and watched Ev do all the work."

"The 'Shee-ster seems to think that if," Jubilee paused to clear her throat and try to project an Irish brogue, " 'Jono's made tae take an interest in Christmas, he might finally get it into his wee head that we care about him and he's got family an' everythin' isn't so dang angsty alla the time'." She gave up all pretense of trying to mimic Sean's accent, and gave a wide grin. "However, it fails miserably. He just bitches, sits around with us, and is generally as miserable as he always is. Though, t' give the guy a little credit, he comes up with some amazing stuff for folks on Christmas."

Gayle paused as she sat down at the kitchen table, reclining there, appreciative for the warmth of her uniform. Massachusetts' winters were cold. She arched a brow at the last comment. Jonothon? Good with anything at Christmas? "Oh? Do tell?"

"Yeah. He's always attentive. It's weird. He knows what you want, and if he can get it, he does," Jubilee said off-handedly, "and he always brings the guitar up and we get to pester him for carols. And he justâ€¦ puts up with it. It's weird. He is so horrid to be around till, y' know, the last minuteâ€¦ and then on Christmas he lets just a little bit of the proverbial cheer in, y' know?" The Asian's eyes moved away from the other young woman, as she went to dig through the cupboards after the hot chocolate mix. A moment later, as she'd found the box, she offered, very softly, "We figured it was for

Paige's benefit, y' know? She loves Christmas, and her birthday is the 20th and all. When she had to spend her first two hereâ€¦ it really upset her. It was the first ones away from her family, and she didn't like it much."

"She must be lucky that her sister was due to deliver on Christmas," Gayle offered, but, wisely, did not dig into the subject of Paige.

Jubilee got the subtle signals for onceâ€"no talking about Paige. "What about your folks?" she asked lightly, "I mean, what are they doing without you?"

"They got a phone messageâ€"At least, my cousin did. Butâ€¦ he wasn't home. Didn't really expect him to be, though. I'll try again Christmas Day."

"What about your parents?"

"What about them?"

If the tone of her voice was any indication, they wouldn't be getting a phone call. "Oookay," Jubilee muttered under her breath as she waited for her drink to finish in the microwave. She tried for a neutral subject. Really. Butâ€¦

"Hey, Gayle?"

"Mmm?"

"Gal to gal, as P-â€¦ anyway, I'm wonderin'. Just _how_ serious _were_ you and Jono, anyway?"

Gayle looked up from unlocking her heavy training gloves to arch both brows to the point where they almost became one with her hairline. And there was Jubilee, looking curiously at her over the frothy top of her mug. "Excuse me?" the young Brit asked, "But what was that?"

Jubilee rolled her eyes and came to sit down at the table. "I mean, y' knowâ€¦" she wagged her eyebrows in illustration of what she meant. "Didja do the nasty, and everything?"

"If you're asking if we'd shagged, then the answer is yes," Gayle said tersely.

Jubilee took a sip of her chocolate thoughtfully. "Do you realize," she said, mostly to herself, "that yer the only chick on campus who's not hymenally-impaired?" Jubilee ignored Gayle's cough at the term, "And that Everett is probably the only guy on campus, who hasn't at least, y' know, done it _once_?"

Gayle's brows didn't quite lower yetâ€"she saw an opportunity for revenge. "So you and Ev haven't been sneaking in and out of the dorms late at night?"

Now it was Jubilee's turn to cough into her mug. "No," she squawked, and then squirmed a little.

"No _plans_ to, anytime soon?" Gayle took some small amount of

pleasure in watching the younger girl slightly discomfited.

"_No!_ Why would youâ€¦ youâ€¦ planâ€¦ I meanâ€¦ It'sâ€¦" Jubilee stammered a moment and then grumped. "I don't even know what to _expect._ This isn't anything I could ask, y' know, Logan about. 'r Frosty, when she was about. I mean, they've been _around_, but Wolvie's a guyâ€¦ and Frosty walked around in bondage gear."

"Then why are you asking me? Callisto's around."

"I don't like Callisto."

Gayle shrugged a little, and then says, "I can't really offer you a lot of guidance, m'dear. I've been with a total of two men in my life."

"Jono-the-gloomy and who else?"

Gayle gave her a look of oddly bemused irritation. "Buck."

"Buck? There's a name to scream out in bed, for sure."

Gayle actually laughed out loud at that thought. Her? Screaming in bed? "You won't catch me _screaming_ very often. Screaming is reserved for great sex."

"So it wasn't great with Buck? Or Jono?" Jubilee jibed. "Or couldn't theyâ€¦ y' knowâ€¦ satisfy you?"

The devilish look in her blue eyes told Gayle that she was teasing, and so just went along with it. "Actually, the sex with Buck was mediocre. So no, no screaming with Buck. Sex with _Jono_ on the other hand," her green eyes met blue with that slyness of women swapping information about their husbands, as she leaned over the table to offer conspiratorially, "was earth-shattering. And did qualify for getting me to scream. Hence, why we didn't do it at his place much. His parents didn't appreciate it."

Jubilee flushed guiltily but laughed anyway. Well, she _had_ wanted to know. And so, leaning over as Gayle did, hot chocolate forgotten in the presence of a 'hot topic', she said, "So what was he like?"

Gayle smirked, her green eyes bright, "Incredible. I mean, I _had_ fooled around a bit, before I got together with Jono. Playing at being bad, y' know. Trying to be something that I didn't think I could really beâ€¦ and, well, then Jonothon came alongâ€¦ and everything changed," her grin turned Cheshire-Cat wide, and she offered off handedly, "He was better than any man I'd done anything with before."

Jubilee's jaw dropped. "Yer shittin' me."

"Nope. Hell, if you'd known him _then_, as compared to _now_, you'd have panted after him, too. God, he had a way of _looking_ at you with those dark brown eyes of his. Said all sorts of things with just a bloody look, and turned your knees to Jell-O in the process," Gayle sighed softly, as she leaned back in her chair, fond memories turning bitter-sweet. "He couldn't sing, you know. But put a bloody guitar in his hands and he's a virtuoso. And he'd play for youâ€¦and just you,

if he cared about you. People? Oh, he loved playing for crowds. But he only really shined if he was alone—or had someone special in mind."

Silence reigned for a time, as Gayle looked down at her hands, folded one over the others so the little jaws could not be seen. And then, a new voice broke the silence.

Anyone ever tell you not to talk 'bout a bloke behind 'is back?

Both girls jumped in their seats. "Jono!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

Jonothon leaned there in the kitchen doorway. I sensed yer nearby, he explained briefly, An' figured yer might want t' know the trees were bloody done. His eyes took on a smirky glint, Oh, an' yer bloke was about to cudgel me to death wit' one of the presents if I said another bloody word, Jubes.

Jubilee made a face, "God, what do you do to him? Keep score on how quick you can get him torked? Yeesh, man, get a new hobby."

Right Bastardry is me 'obby.

"I'll attest to that one," Gayle agreed as she rose, watching Jubilee put her now-empty mug into the dishwasher.

I thought yer were attesting t' me better attributes, luv? Jonothon said dryly, with a healthy dose of bitterness to his tone.

Gayle just tightened her jaw, and said nothing.

Jubilee looked between the two former lovers, and then put up her hands. "I'm gonna go see if Ev is calm again yet. Yeesh. You'd think that just because Ange pulled his head out of his ass and went after Paige, that you might do the same thingâ€|" Jubilee muttered under her breath, as she pushed the leather-clad psi in the doorway.

Jono called after, Fuck yer too, Jubilee, and then looked over at Gayle, who was slowly rising from the table. There was a brief moment of tension, as he looked at her, letting brown eyes find the forest green of hers.

She straightened slightly, before walking over to the door. However, Jonothon interposed himself in the door frame, his dark eyes intense. What did she just say his gaze could do? Turn knees to Jell-O? _

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Well, whatever it was, he was doing it now. Gayle.

"Jono."

There was a silent communication. A hurt they'd only touched on, a gap they hadn't bridged.

_

Angelo.

—

"You know where he is. And you know it won't happen again."
> <p>

Do I?

"Don't you?" Gayle snapped back, "And does it matter? His heart belongs to Paige."

There was a new tightness to his eyes. Does it?

"You ought to know, you're his mate. Or were you dense enough not to notice that, too?" Gayle retorted, voice held taut and low.

Jono's eyes narrowed to slits, but he looked away. Had he missed so much? So much that he hadn't seen the way Angelo had looked not just at Gayle, but Paige as well? But Paigeâ€| it'd gone on much longer! Maybe, he admitted hesitantly, Maybe not. Never knâ€|thought that yer an' 'im wouldâ€|

"We _didn't,_ Jono. That's just it. We stopped. You know who my heart belongs to, moments of loneliness and weakness aside."

Do-

This time, she reached out and placed two fingers over where his lips would have once beenâ€|it wasn't the action that silenced him, it was the touch. She hadn't touched him, except to feed, in nearly a month.

"Yes, Jono," she said, very softly. "You do. And I know you know that you do. And I know I hurt you. Again. Butâ€| I wish you'd forgive me."

Jonothon just stared at her a moment, his gaze drinking in her pleading expression, her needy eyes, and then reached up, wrapping his long-fingered hand around her wrist as he pulled it away from the remains of his scarred, mangled face.

We'll see. he released her hand, and began to stalk away.

She merely watched after him, and then sighed. Christmas wasn't going to be very merry this year at all.

* * * * *

Callisto waded out into the chill snow, mindless of the fact that it went up to her hips, out here in the woods. If she could survive living in the sewers and trudging through human refuse on a day-to-day basis, this should be little problem.

She knew they'd be upset knowing she was running around out here in the wet and the cold of the Massachusetts winter. But she didn't care. She was a Morlock! She'd survived meaner and nastier New York Winters.

And she had to honor another Morlock tradition. Just as she

celebrated the 'human Christmas', she celebrated a Morlock version as well. However, she could not go meditate about the closing year in the Chamber of Light, so out at the river would have to suffice.

As the wind whistled past her ears, she headed out into the woods, pushing through the snow doggedly.

Then her heightened senses caught sounds, scentsâ€”bad and strange, jarring against the chill tranquillity of the deadened trees. She paused, her nostrils flaring. What was it?

The cold tang of metal. The stench of strangers.

There were men in the wood.

She suddenly dropped down to as crouch as best she could in the waist-deep snow, her blue eye narrowing slightly. She stopped, found that stillness she needed. Where were they? Who were they? What were they doing here?

They were near, she could hear that much. If she went for the school, she might not make it. They'd hear her and the snow would slow herâ€”it was best to stay, wait, skulk and see the threat they presented.

"There's another."

The voice was as cold as the snow that chilled her bones. She turned her head abruptly, and saw, as snow began to fall upon her skin, a woman. Pale and cruel was her beauty, and her violet eyes took in Callisto's form with both amusement and disdain. Clad all in black, but so revealing that if she were any truly mortal woman, she would have frozen to death within an instant. To her good fortune, she sat upon a throne that hovered a foot above the crest of the highest snow drifts

"Here she is."

Hellfire guards, masked and lacking identity, surrounded her. In their hands rested rifles. "Light take you," Callisto hissed lowly, coughing once at the chill air, "I surrender."

"You never had any choice in the matter, my dear," Selene, the Black Queen of the Hellfire Club, cooed. She gestured with the riding crop she held lightly in one hand, first to some of her guards, then to the woman before her. "Take her," she instructed curtly, and they pushed through the snow, guns raised. Callisto put her hands up, behind her headâ€”not like she was armed, out here in her new home, and it would be better in the long run to go along with things.

Little did she know that two blue eyes saw the entire scene. Another, smaller figure burrowed beneath the earth back to the school. Hiding was one thing, when she was alone, but when she heard one of her 'family' get involved with the bad-feeling people, Penance knew that she had to do something.

* * * * *

Jonothon felt very bad.

This, of course, was standard operating procedure for the young man. Life sucked, you blew out your chest, and since you were a psionic entity in a casing of dead flesh that hadn't quite remembered to rot yet, you had little hope that it'd just last the standard 'lifetime'. So, life would suck for a very long time.

Jonothon trudged back into the student lounge, not really feeling the need to go out into the cold that even he could feel through his half-numbed skin.

He let his mind reach out, scanning the school grounds. Ev and Jubilee were on their way out, heading toward the Biosphere to check on Monet, Gayle was making good time in the cold to the Girls' Dorm. He decided he could safely sit in the lounge and brood.

At least, until he noticed the new thought-signature on the fringe of his range. Callisto? And the Hellfire Club Soldiers!?

He turned and changed direction, bolting for the door to the main building, mind straining to reach out, see what was wrong. Callisto? He strained to project his 'voice' far enough for her to hear him.

Oh no. Well, we can't have you warning everyone, pet. A new voice, cold as frosted glass and just as beautiful, pierced his consciousness. And then there was a brief sensation, akin to being stabbed. Then all he was aware of was that he was falling.

Then blackness.

* * * * *

"Monet? Monet, lass?"

Sean Cassidy, headmaster of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, sat in the chair across from one of his most misunderstood students. Monet, for her part, merely stared, eyes wide and lacking iris or pupil having rolled so far back in her head.

He sighed softly. She'd been out for over an hour, and Jubilee said nothing had set her off. She'd merely been watching Callisto and Gayle train when she blanked out, once again, into one of her 'autistic trances'.

He sighed wearily, and looked down into the greenery of the Biosphere, and then rubbed his eyes quietly. There are days he wondered if he'd truly been cut out for thisâ€¦ truly prepared. The first year had been relatively 'smooth', and things got a little rougher in the second. Now, two months into their third year together, he was beginning to doubt himselfâ€¦ and his ability to do these children right.

"Mr. Cassidy?"

He started briefly, looking over to Monet as she spoke, apparently roused while he was in the middle of his depressed musings.

Dread colored the normally cool and collected tones of her voice, "We have visitors." Then she was up and on the move, long hair swishing

softly even as her boot-heels clicked against the metal floor.

Sean scrambled out of his chair. "Monet? Monet? _M!_"

But she did not answer " merely going down into the biosphere and into the snow.

* * * * *

"I cannot _believe_ _him_ some days. I mean" I just"it's _impossible_ to get through to him."

Jubilee listened to Everett vent briefly. The young man concluded by just shaking his head, the two then making their way down to the boy's dorm. "Y' know, you're just repeatin' what we already know, Ev. Jono isn't gunna change his ways 'r anything, anytime soon."

"I know. I just wish _someone_ could get through to him. Paige tried" "

"Paige wanted to find out what was under his bandages, if ya get my meaning. Not 'bring him out of his shell' to everybody, yeah?"

Everett scowled a little. "That wasn't very nice way to put it," he muttered, and then looked over up at the girls' dorm. He could see Gayle just going inside. "Her 'chat' with Jono must've gone about as well as mine did."

"Yeah, they looked like they were headed for a fight when I left." Which, of course, was _why_ Jubilee left. She'd had enough Jonothon-oriented relationship angst before the Queen had arrived on campus.

Everett was about to answer, when something"a new aura?"suddenly came into the range of his senses. He stopped, and looked around.

Jubilee paused beside him. "Ev?"

"There's another mutant on campus," he said gravely, "a powerful one. I've never sensed this aura before."

Jubilee's guard was suddenly up, as she looked left and then right. Then, both heard Monet's voice calling over a distance. Mon dieu! We've been invaded!

And then they swarmed up from the snow, magical illusions dropping and revealing the forms of masked, Hellfire soldiers.

And then the fight was joined in earnest.

* * * * *

Mon Deiu! We've been invaded!

Sean heard Monet's mental cry pierce his thoughts, and he almost stumbled. Out in the cold outside the biosphere, he sucked in a breath of the freezing air and let out a shrill scream, the wail of the Banshee that was his mutant birthright.

Monet herself had taken to the air, a dark blot above the glare of the mid-morning sun on the snow. "Hellfire Solidiers!" She exclaimed aloud as she pointed to where they swarmed around the two dorms.

Sean could make out the forms of Jubilee and Everett, and then Monet.

Sir, what are we to do? She linked her mind to his as they raced towards the trio.

Ye help out Ev an' Jubilee. I'll get tae Gayleâ€"She'll need a power she can use if she's going tae be of anyhelp tae us.

Are you sure that's wise, sir? Monet queried, even as she dipped down to join the fray.

Don't question me judgment fer now, lass! Just get tae Everett and Jubilee! Sean ordered, as he veered in the opposite direction, heading for the lone English woman.

* * * * *

They were right above her. She could make out the dim, angry shouts and the bad-feelings.

Her friends were near. She could hear them to, screaming above the snow.

She stopped burrowing. She stopped hiding.

Claws broke through frozen earth and suddenly the snow was stained, screams and wild gunfire splitting the air as Hellfire Soliders fell to her claws.

No one would hurt her or her friends! No one!

* * * * *

Even M swooped in, Jubilee pushed Everett downward to the cold concrete of the path between the main building and the dorms. "Shit! What the hell are they doing!?"
> <p>

"Penance is near by! She's probably the one that's causing all the havoc," Ev gritted out, "Now get off me! Let me synch to her aura so I can get some bullet-proofing of my own!"

Jubilee poked her head up, dark hair a blot against the white, crisp snow fall. "Indeed, Hellfire guards risked hitting each other while the smaller young woman darted beneath the snow and took them out from the knees. She could see the occasional spray of red jet up as one by one they fell to the Yugoslavian girl's talons.

This kind of violence never failed to nauseate her. But she knew it had to be done.

"Quit hiding in the snow Jubilee andâ€"gghkk!" Monet was giving out an aura, but something stopped her dead in her tracksâ€"and while

flying midair. The young Algerian hit the snow with a soft 'whump', and vanished into the white drifts.

"Shit! Ev! Somebody took out Monet!"

"Don't you think I know that?!" Ev snapped in return. He synched to both the unseen Penance and the unconscious Monet, wrapping their powers around him like a cloak of rainbow colors with his aura. He grunted as the pain shot through his arms, his aura taking on a brick red shade and clinging to him like a second skin, elongating at his fingers to give him a set of claws.

"You ready?"

"Lets do it!" And then, the two attacked, crackling with powers both their own and borrowed.

* * * * *

Gayle had hit the deck the moment the first shot was fire. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest, and the first thing she did was seek out the one mind that mattered most to her.

Jono? _Jono?!?_ she howled down the tenuous link that the energy she stole from him provided. _Answer me! _

However, there was nothingâ€”the link was giving no answer, just dead air as if a line had been cut.

But soon the silence was filled with the wail of the Bansheeâ€”Sean Cassidy landed not to far from her, and hurried to her side.

"Ye alright, lass?"

"Fine, but I can't contact Jonothonâ€”what in blazes is going on?!"

"Hellfire Soldiers. I can only guess that Emma's at the route of this," he berated himself mentally! He should have known better then to just think Emma would slink away and leave her schoolâ€”her studentsâ€”like this. She thought she owned them, just like everyone else.

"Got any plans, Teach?" Gayle asked brusquely, radiating her nervousness to even the most blind.

"Aye. Yer going to nip off a bit of me marrow, and yer going tae fight with me powers."

"_What_?!"

"Yer heard me!" he grabbed her hand in his, clutching it tightly. "Sup, and we'll go help the others!"

She glared at him briefly, and then cavedâ€”she felt her tiny maws latch into the meat of his palm, the tongues burrowing through flesh till they found what they were looking for.

The jolt of energy was a delicious rushâ€”her eyes went black, her senses expanding along the lines of her emplate gifts. She could

sense all the mutants on the campus"and then she gasped.

"Sean, it's not Emma. It's too old, too potent to be Emma!" she said urgently as she released him.

Sean seemed pale and unsteady briefly, but he shook off the shock of the feeding. "It's nae Emma?" Well, regardless, someone with clout in the Hellfire Club was attacking the Academy, and he wasn't going to just sit back and let it happen.

"Don't bother trying tae learn tae fly just yet, lass. Just scream"and be careful!"

She nodded"his shrill cry didn't hurt her ears, this time, as he took off to the sky again.

And then, she sprinted through the chill air toward her classmates, hoping in her heart that Jonothon was all right.

* * * * *

Everett was only aware of two things. The ping of the bullets against his aura, and the fact that Jubilee was so very vulnerable.

He'd charged in, aura-claws slashing, taking the aggressive stance for once, and he didn't enjoy it one bit. Everything was red and hazy through the blur of his aura and the rush of blood in his ears. God! Couldn't it just stop?

Penance darted with him, as soldiers fell before their twin sets of claws. Jubilee ducked and danced, trying to strike at the distracted before diving into the snow to take cover and pray they weren't hit by a stray bullet. Gayle joined the fray, snow flying up in a blinding haze before her borrowed sonic scream.

Monet was down. Jonothon and Callisto were missing.

Gayle's sonic scream screamed went sharp with pain, somewhere off in the distance. Her body fell, vanishing into the snow. A plasma burst burned and felled the soldier who'd had the rifled aimed for her. Sean dove for the snow where she'd fallen.

The fight raged on. Where were Jonothon and Callisto!?

And then, the gunshots ceased, and all were left where the cries and wailing of the wounded. They were all gone. The Hellfire soldiers lay unconscious or bleeding or near death"or dead.

Everett felt the bile rise up in his throat and choked it right back down into the pit of his stomach. He's had to hurt them. They'd hurt Gayle, and who knew where Jonothon and Callisto were!

"Ev!"

Jubilee's shrill scream pierced his senses, and turned to see her, wet and shivering and looking so scared for him. Him! He'd had the aura to protect him, and he'd been worrying about her all this time and she was looking like he was the one that went out into the fray naked as a newborn?

But he couldn't help but smile. She was all right!

And then her scream pierced his ears againâ€”this time as the black marble throne that impossibly hovered in the air came into view.

He knew who it was. The mutant whose aura he'd sensed before. But now he had a face to put it to. A name.

Selene, Black Queen of the Hellfire Club.

He felt his drop down to his boots as despair set in. Who could hope to defeat her, weakened as they were? Mutant vampire and sorceress!

Callisto hovered at her feet, eye closed and body still. Was she alive?

And Everett felt hope flee before the might of the Goddess of the Black Flame.

"Surrender now, and I can promise you either swift deaths by my hand, or servitude under my guidance. Whichever you prefer," the black-clad woman purred, tapping her thigh with the riding crop she wielded so casually.

Everett swallowed hard, and then turned his eyes to Jubilee. And just how did they answer _that_?

Jubilee could offer nothing, her blue eyes showing her helplessness.

Penance was gone again, hiding. She knew better then to face the Black Queen, even in her strange mind.

And with that, the two young mutants waited for the only person they could draw strength fromâ€”the errant mentor who had fled with one of the wounded.

* * * * *

The hum of the bull-roarer was the first sound to penetrate Jonothon's consciousness. Hazy, half-remembered pain ate at the edge of his senses, and he felt cool, gloved hands on his shoulders.

"A fine job Sean has done with you," said a cool, familiar voice. "Look at you. Defenses down, assaulted, and laying unconscious in the commons. If I hadn't been watching, you might be dead by now."

He tried to speakâ€”to project his thoughtsâ€”but the assault on his mind rendered him mute. He felt a surprisingly gentle caress on his brow, smoothing back his dark hair.

"Yes, I know. I know what's gone on. But don't worry. I've known everything that's happened here."

He tried to come fully into consciousness, to open his eyes and get the reality of this presence. But the voice merely soothed. "Don't worry. We'll be back for you."

And then Jonothon was alone. He gave up the struggle for

consciousness, and slumped back down into the warm blanket of nothingness.

* * * * *

Jubilee was about to cry.

This was a rare thing for Jubilee, as she tried to show strength and fearlessness at all times. But with Monet and Gayle wounded, Sean gone, and Penance vanished and the Black Queen hovering above them, she and Everett didn't stand a chance.

Everett was looking at her. There was a silent agreement. If they had to go down, they'd go down fighting! They gathered their powerâ€”nevermind that they were wet, freezing, and tired. They'd make this one last stand. _She just hoped Logan would be proud._

--

On the mental count of threeâ€”| Everett nodded. His aura latched onto her power, and she could almost feel him through it as they prepared for this final gambit.

The Black Queen merely smiled, almost in a mockery of what they were about to do.

"Now--!" The word was torn from Jubilee's throatâ€”but nothing happened.

There were no fireworks, no rage, no nothing. No flare of rainbow auras, no great last stand.

There was only a familiar presence in the back of her mind that held her body like a vice.

And a voice that was just as cold as Selene's had been rang out over the chill air.

"Are you aware you are violating the Hellfire compact, Selene?"

Jubilee wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry at the absurdity of it.

The White Queen might just have saved them from the Black Queen.

* * * * *

The Black Queen _frowned._ She could bring nations to a stop with that frown.

But the woman in white who stared her down didn't really seem to mind. Emma's cool, blue eyes merely locked on her violet orbs, waiting for her to respond.

"I'm sorry, Emma," The Black Queen purred, "But I thought you'd _abandoned_ the Academy. Therefore, leaving it fair game."

"The Academy will always be under my protection and jurisdiction, Selene," Emma answered casually. "Never forget that. Now release

Callisto, pick up your toy soldiers, and go back to your castle."

Selene frowned, and with a negligent gesture, Callisto dropped like a forgotten doll to the snow. Another gesture, and the soldiers vanished. But before that final spell could be triggered to whisk her away, Emma called out briefly.

"And Selene?"

"Yes, Emma?"

"You might want to reconsider Trevor Fitzroy as your Black Rook."

The implied threat was not lost on the Black Queen. She made no sound, merely vanished.

Emma shared a look with her two students. She did not smile, and she did not gush. She merely said, "You did very well today. Now get your instructor and Monet, and let us get to the medlab. There isâ€| much to discuss."

Both teens sluggishly moved to do as they were told.

* * * * *

As soon as Sean was sure that the Englishwoman was not going to die, the autodoc working in overdrive at the wound that had taken out a good chunk of her shoulder, before he went to run out and rejoin the fray. He had to make sure the kids were okay, no matter that he didn't know who was behind this.

He looked once at his fallen student, and then went running for the doorâ€"

â€"Only to skid to a stop when it open before he even reached it.

The blue eyes and pale face he had not seen in almost half a year. He stopped. Sucked in a gasp.

—

Gayle said it wasn't her! It wasn't her aura on campus!

—

But none the less, there she stood before him.

The tip of her riding crop jabbed him lightly against his chest. "Out of the way, Sean," she said curtly, stepping insideâ€"behind her came Everett and Jubilee, carrying an unconscious Callisto and supporting a dazed Monet respectively.

And finally, a soaking-wet Penance trailed afterwards and huddled in a corner.

"Emma?"

She said nothing, merely doffed her cloak and helped Monet up onto a medlab bed. She looked to Everett and Jubilee. "Go change into clean, warm clothing. Everett, go get Jonothon. He's unconscious in the main building. Jubilee, get clothes for Monet, Callisto, and Gayle."

The two blinked mutely, and then nodded, the shock of the fight leaving them.

Sean just mutely stared at the woman as she began to strip away the soaked clothing of Callisto's away. Monet's body could endure the chill far better the Morlocks' tough-but-still-human constitution.

"Emma?"

"Yes, Sean?"

"Yeâ€"

"Yes, Sean. I'm back. And you and I will have much to discuss," she looked up from her work, letting the autodoc take over as she approached the Irishman, boot-heels clicking on the metal surface of the medlab floor, "Much to discuss."

Before he could respond, the riding crop lashed out across his cheek, opening up a bloody gash. "This is my school. And you will never, ever take it away from me. Now, we have nothing else to discuss."

And she turned to wait for Everett and Jonothon, as Cassidy frownedâ€"and then cleaned his face.

Oh, there would be a reckoningâ€"for sins past and present. He promised her that.

* * * * *

~*~ Christmas Eve ~*~

~*~ One Week Later ~*~

Emma watched them with cool, calculating eyes. This was not a departure from how she normally gazed upon her students, really, but for Christmas, they expected she might warm up a little. Even from the Christmas they spent at Monet's home, to the Christmas they spent back in the school, they usually had seem some sliver of warmth in her head.

Now, it seemed that the White Queen really had been carved from ice, this year.

Jubilee and Everett sat near the tree, laughingâ€"Emma didn't like the darkness to the boy's eyes. There was never darkness to his gaze before, and she knew why. There was blood on his hands now.

Jonothon sat idly by, looking dully at the fireplaceâ€"or perhaps, at Penance, who laid before it like some hound let in from the cold for the holiday as a treat.

As per usual, Jonothon was in the crowd moreso then with it. He hadn't yet regained his telepathic faculties, cutting off his already limited faculties for communication.

Monet sat aloof from the rest, also looking into the fire—her eyes were white, and perhaps, she was having a jolly holiday in her own private little world.

Her eyes finally sought out Sean and Callisto. The Irishman looked so _old_! Is this what caring for eight wild children alone for four months had done to him?

Callisto sat with him, as they shared a drink and quiet talk. Brandy was in the glasses lodged in their hands, and the two seemed quite companionable. Well, at least he had a 'buffer' to keep her from him again.

Or so he thought.

She rolled her own drink in her hands, watching the cognac slosh in the curve of the glass. What to do, who to give a merry Christmas—|

Her thoughts went to the 'newest' of the brood, who was sleeping, heavily medicated, after having the majority of her shoulder blown out by a high-powered rifle spray. She would have to be watched—but she sensed no betrayal, no desires beyond being cured and being by—

That was it.

Emma rose slowly from her seat, setting her drink aside, and moved over to the young man all wrapped in black.

Jubilee's eyes trailed her for a time, boring into her back. She ignored them.

"Jonothon?"

He started a bit, apparently almost as much in his own private world as Monet was. He blinked up at her questioningly.

"There is a young woman in a very lonely medlab for Christmas Eve. Perhaps you might be so inclined to alleviate some of her pain?" _and perhaps_, she thought, _some of yours._

--

Jonothon's eyes dropped from hers, thoughtful for a moment. And then he rose quietly, walking out of the lounge and headed out into the cold—to the medlab.

Emma smiled a private little smile, and then looked over her students.

Yes, she could still do them some good. And she was going to.

And neither Sean nor his pet Morlock would stop her. This was _her_ school.

And no one was going to take it from her. Ever. Again.

End
file.